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Chinese Album Leaves

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IN THE

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FOREWORD

The present picture book was selected by Dr. James F. Cahill. He has added thereto his pointed observations on painting, so that there are many comparisons in his notes which should be of great value. Aside from knowing the Chinese painting collections in this country, Dr. Cahill has had the advantage of seeing some of the finest collections in Japan; the former Chinese Imperial collection now in Taiwan; to say nothing of collections both in Europe and the United Kingdom. We are indeed fortunate to have this excellent collection, together with Dr. Cahill's notes.

A. G. WENLEY,
Director,
Freer Gallery of Art.

June 19, 1961

CHINESE ALBUM LEAVES

Of the three main forms in which paintings are mounted in China, the album leaf seems the least foreign to Western eyes. While we have no close counterpart to the hanging scroll or the handscroll, small paintings and drawings which correspond to the Chinese album leaves have been made and enjoyed throughout the history of our art—sometimes as book illustrations; sometimes in sets, as in the Books of Hours; sometimes singly, as small watercolors or wash drawings. Album leaves have occupied in China much the same position that such small works have here, seldom attaining the stature of paintings in the larger formats, but having a special value of their own, being ideally suited for intimate enjoyment.

Leaves of the kind that we have collected in this picture book were mostly produced as individual works, or sometimes in pairs (e.g. Pl. XX and XXI). A few result from the cutting down of larger compositions, which was done either to make several paintings out of one (Pl. II and III, for example, are sections cut from a handscroll that originally comprised five figures) or to salvage an intact portion of a damaged painting. A number of the leaves are identified by their distinctive shape as having originally been mounted on flat fans (the cover picture, the two color plates, and several others belong to this class). All these, whatever their origin, were eventually gathered and mounted in albums by collectors, usually with such group titles as “Assembled Treasures of Four Dynasties” or “Flowers from the Garden of Art.” In spite of the titles, they are ordinarily very spotty collections, often including only one or two good leaves among many of mediocre quality; an album composed entirely of first-class leaves is very rare. These collected albums, made up of paintings by different artists and of different periods, must be distinguished from another kind, the album composed of a set of pictures by a single painter, done all at once as a coherent series. Such serial albums are meant to remain intact, and it is mistaken—even irresponsible—to disperse them. The single leaves, by contrast, can be grouped as one pleases, sold or traded separately, and even, as they are in modern times, removed from the albums for framing.

Another useful (although not always sharp) distinction is between leaves which are essentially small versions of larger pictures, and which might be expanded to hanging scroll size without any significant change (Pl. XXXII is an example), and those in which the small size is an inseparable part of the very nature of the picture, either because the artist is displaying his technique by painstaking drawing of detail in miniature

(Pl. V and XXII) or because the matter of the picture and the manner of treatment are too slight and sketchy to sustain enlargement. This last situation is especially common in later Chinese painting.

A history of the album leaf in terms of style would be pointless, because to a large degree it would recapitulate the history of Chinese painting as a whole. Almost every school and style, at least from the twelfth century onward, is represented in this form. A history of the form itself is more to the point, but need not occupy much space. Both literary sources and surviving examples indicate that the popularity of the album leaf began around the end of the Northern Sung period, perhaps during the reign of the Emperor Hui-tsung (reigned 1101-1125). To our knowledge, no undoubted examples of album leaves from earlier periods exist, although a few are mentioned in books, and representations of painted fans in earlier paintings indicate that that form was already in use by the eighth century or so. The golden age of the album leaf, in any case, was the Southern Sung period, covering roughly the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When one thinks of painting of the Southern Sung Imperial Academy, in particular, it is album leaves that come first to mind—the small, lyrical landscapes of Ma Yüan, Hsia Kuei, and others, bird-and-flower leaves by a succession of masters beginning with the members of Hui-tsung's Academy, palace scenes with elegant ladies and plump children. In the most general way, it can be said that album leaves from the later periods tend to represent conservative currents, and especially to copy or imitate the Sung leaves. Examples of single leaves by leading individualist painters are not unknown, however; the picture by Ts'ui Tzu-chung in this collection (Pl. XXX) is an example.

Not all of the paintings we have chosen for reproduction here are of top artistic quality, by any means; some are by minor painters, many anonymous and difficult to date with any precision, a few distinguished more by charm of subject than by superiority of execution. But the group as a whole represents fairly the range, and exemplifies the special virtues, of these very appealing small relatives of the great landscape, bird-and-flower, and figure paintings of China.

JAMES CAHILL

PLATES

Cover Plate (44.51): Swallows and willow tree.

By Mao I (active 1165-1174)

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-13/16", w. 9-3/4".

Sung dynasty

Mao I, whose signature appears in the lower right, served in the Imperial Painting Academy in the late twelfth century, and was a specialist in bird-and-flower subjects. His birds, we are told, "looked as if about to fly and sing." The sense of movement in this fan painting is indeed extraordinarily vivid. The birds are depicted with minute dabs of ink, overlaid in various tones, without outlines. From their rumpled feathers, the bending of the willow branches and reeds below, and the waves on the water, we know that there is a strong wind. The setting of a single swallow, riding the wind, against a deep void at one side of the picture is a device typical of the period.

Frontispiece and color plate following title page (35.8, 35.9): Anonymous (12th or 13th century)

Palace ladies bathing and dressing children;
palace ladies drinking tea.

Sung dynasty

Ink and colors on silk. Each, ht. 8-5/16", w. 9-5/8".

This pair of fan paintings was formerly attributed to the Southern T'ang dynasty court painter Chou Wen-chü (active mid-10th century), but appears to be somewhat later—such details as the faces of the ladies and the drawing of their costumes suggest the date indicated above. They may, however, be based on earlier designs. Another version of the bathing scene, somewhat rearranged and with additional figures, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is in the manner of the eighth-century artist Chou Fang; and a common original, perhaps by Chou Fang, may lie behind both pictures. In any case, the lack of setting and the spacing of the figures point to a T'ang dynasty origin for the designs.

Pl. I (54.126): Bird on a branch of blossoming apricot. Anonymous (13th or 14th century)

Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 10-5/8", w. 8-7/8".

Sung or early Yüan dynasty

The names of two artists have in the past been attached to this painting: Li Chih of the eleventh century (a seal with his name is in the upper left) and Wang Yüan of the fourteenth. The latter seems closer to the actual date. Something of the style of the Sung Academy masters remains in the meticulous rendering of the plumage of the bird (probably a lazuline leafbird), the curling leaves, the fine outlines of twigs and the composition. But the drawing as a whole is heavier, recalling the more linear treatment of such subjects by Yüan dynasty artists such as Wang Yüan. The painting has been preserved for centuries in Japan, where such minor Chinese works were much imitated and copied by native artists.

Pl. II-III (48.10, 48.11): Portraits of Wang Huan and Feng P'ing. Anonymous (11th century)

Ink and light color on silk. 48.10: ht. 15-1/2", w. 12-3/8".
48.11: ht. 15-3/4", w. 12-7/8".

Sung dynasty

These two portraits are from a set of five, originally in the form of a handscroll, titled "Five Old Men of Sui-yang." Two of the others are in the Yale University Art Gallery, and the fifth in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sui-yang is a district in Honan Province; a shrine to the Five Old Men was once located there. These paintings were evidently done during the lifetimes of the subjects, or else shortly after their deaths, and so date from the eleventh century. The inscriptions identify the scholars, and give their official titles and ages when portrayed (Wang Huan: 90; Feng P'ing: 87). The portraits were formal and rather stiff, but the faces are sensitively drawn, and the drapery, slightly shaded, hangs naturally to suggest the form and the stance of the bodies beneath.

Pl. IV (11.155a): River landscape with water buffalo, calf, and herd-boy. Anonymous (12th century?)

Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 9-11/16", w. 9-11/16".

Sung dynasty

Paintings of this *genre* are often attributed to Li T'ang (active ca. 1080-1130), who is said to have done them as a specialty. This one is a fairly typical specimen of the lyrical scenes painted by his followers in the Southern Sung period, and ranks high among them in quality. The carefully depicted animals and boy, the trees with their elegantly outlined trunks and branches, are set against a background simply but skillfully treated in graded washes: a misty void, out of which a stream flows, and low hills beyond.

Pl. V (35.10): A hostelry in the mountains. By Yen Tz'u-yü (late 12th century)

Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 9-15/16", w. 10-3/16".

Sung dynasty

Like the previous picture, this is the work of a follower of Li T'ang, in this case an identifiable one. Yen Tz'u-yü, whose signature is written very small on a rock in the lower right, entered the Imperial Painting Academy around 1163, and, while never as famous as his brother Yen Tz'u-p'ing, was honored with the Golden Girdle, an emblem of high rank. He portrays a village situated on a rocky knoll by the river; a solitary mounted traveler, on his way there, has just entered the composition from the left, followed by his servant. He will stop overnight before continuing his journey along the road that leads out at the right.

Pl. VI (15.8): Water buffalo and herd-boy under willows. Anonymous (12th century?)

Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 9-1/2", w. 9-3/4".

Sung dynasty

Very close in style to Plate IV (note the similarities in the painting of the buffalo, the earth banks, the tree trunks), this also is evidently the work of a fairly close follower of Li T'ang. It may be a survivor from a set of the "Ten Buffalo Pictures," based on the Ch'an Buddhist allegory of enlightenment in which the buffalo (the unruly human mind) wanders away, is pursued, caught and mounted, and in the end vanishes completely.

- Pl. VII (44.53): Boy on a water buffalo, carrying a ring-necked pheasant. Anonymous
(12th or 13th century?)
Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 9-1/4", w. 9-5/8". Sung dynasty?

An old attribution to the tenth-century master Hsü Hsi may be discounted; we have once more a picture in the Li T'ang tradition, although it fits less securely in that group than the previous three leaves. The season is winter; the boy huddles on the back of the patiently plodding beast, shivering in the cold. Some details suggest a post-Sung date, but a firm dating must await further study.

- Pl. VIII (11.155d): A lakeside pavilion. Anonymous (13th century?)
Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 10-1/2", w. 11". Southern Sung period?

In trying to place this fan painting and the next, one encounters the problem of style vs. quality: Must all leaves in the Southern Sung Academy manner be superb in execution to qualify as genuine works of that period? These two are less than superb, but the compositions, as well as the rendering of landscape, trees, and figures, point to the late Sung as the probable date. In this one, an evening scene, the residents of a lakeside palace stroll on a walk beneath leafy trees.

- Pl. IX (11.155b): River landscape: a lady welcoming an arriving guest. Anonymous
(13th century?)
Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 9-5/16", w. 9-13/16". Southern Sung period?

Certain weaknesses in the construction of this scene may persuade some to choose the safer course of assigning it to a later period; we prefer a date in the late Sung dynasty, and see it as the work of a painter of more sensitivity than strength. In any case, it has great charm. A lady has come from the gate of her riverside house to welcome a friend who has just disembarked and now stands bowing on the shore.

- Pl. X (09.245c). Pavilions among rocks and pines; a stream below. Signature of Ma Yüan
(active ca. 1190-1225)
Ink and light color on silk. Ht. 9-15/16", w. 10-1/4". Late Sung period

This leaf and the following will serve to represent the very popular school of Ma Yüan. His signature is to be seen on both pictures; but it is quite possibly spurious in this case, and certainly so in the other. The drawing of trees, and the passage in the lower right, agree closely with known works by his son Ma Lin, whose paintings were sometimes signed, we are told, by the more famous father; we may have an example of such indulgent family forgery here. The leaf has been badly damaged, and there is considerable repainting.

Pl. XI (15.36j): Pavilions on the hillside, tall pines.

Signature of Ma Yüan

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-13/16", w. 10-5/16".

Copy of the early Ming period

The drawing is skillful, but a decided hardness betrays the hand of the copyist. The original may well have been by Ma Yüan; the theme and composition are typical, and individual elements—trees, rocks, bamboo, distant hills—all belong to Ma Yüan's standard, rather restricted repertory.

Pl. XII (09.244j): Travelers in a winter landscape.

Anonymous

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-9/16", w. 10-1/16".

Late Sung period or later

This is a smaller, lesser, and somewhat later version of a famous composition by Liang K'ai, now in the Tokyo National Museum. In that painting, a wall and gateway are dimly visible in the pass toward which the mounted travelers ascend; here, the pass and gate seem unnecessary in view of the small size of the mountain and the easy passage to its right. Still, this is the work of a competent artist; the spiky, stumpy trees are well depicted, as is the rising ridge, surmounted by bare bushes.

Pl. XIII (11.155g): A mule-train on a mountain road.

Anonymous

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-3/4", w. 10-1/16".

Late Sung period or slightly later

The charming formalization in the drawing of trees and mules contrasts with the bold (although not consistently logical) construction of the rock masses to make this a picture of some interest and distinction. It may well reproduce a composition, or (more likely) a section of a composition, from an earlier period, perhaps the eleventh century.

Pl. XIV (11.161c): Sailing boats on the river; houses on the shore.

By Sheng Mou
(active ca. 1310-1360)

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-13/16", w. 10-3/8".

Yüan dynasty

This is probably a scene along the Yangtze River. In the foreground are several houses set among leafy trees; two sailing boats and a smaller craft pass near the farther shore. The artist's signature and seal are at the top, just left of center. Sheng Mou preserved more of Southern Sung elements than did most of his contemporaries—note here the diagonally divided composition and distant hills, both echoing the Ma Yüan manner. The painting is otherwise distinctively Yüan dynasty in flavor, and in Sheng Mou's distinctive style.

Pl. XV (11.155h): Travelers in a winter landscape.

By Sheng Mou or close follower

Ink and light color on silk. Ht. 10-1/4", w. 9-9/16".

Yüan dynasty

Although the mannerism and lack of sensitivity in this leaf make it less attractive than the foregoing, it may well be by the same painter, and is, in any case, closely in his style. Very similar small pictures exist with signatures and seals of Sheng Mou, who, as a professional painter, probably produced them in quantity. The patterned treatment of bare trees, the nervous contours of rocks and hills, and the application of dots (*tien*) all suggest his hand, as do other features.

- Pl. XVI (44.50): Three grazing horses. Anonymous (13th or 14th century)
Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 10-1/2", w. 8-5/8". Late Sung or Yüan dynasty

A meticulously painted leaf, perhaps a fragment of a larger work, this appears to be a late survival of a tradition founded by painters of the Liao dynasty (10th-12th century), who specialized in hunting scenes and equestrian subjects as reminders of their nomadic background. The foreshortened bodies of the two horses, seen from front and back, pertain to that school of painting, which was carried on by later Chinese artists as a special *genre*.

- Pl. XVII (15.7): Two pied wagtails. Anonymous (14th century?)
Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 7-7/16", w. 8-11/16". Yüan dynasty?

While there is no signature or seal on this leaf, which does not even bear an attribution, similar paintings have usually been placed in the Yüan period by Oriental scholars, and the date is not unreasonable. A curious feature is the drawing of the head of the farther bird with both eyes visible.

- Pl. XVIII (15.36d): A spray of bamboo. By Ni Tsan (1301-1374)
Ink on paper. Ht. 11-1/2", w. 11-5/16". Yüan dynasty

The artist has signed the picture at the right, and added "Ninth day of the ninth moon," but without specifying the year. The close similarity to a painting now in Peking suggests that this slight work belongs to Ni Tsan's last years, when, as he remarks in his inscription on the other painting, "his hand had grown feeble with age." It is distinctly an amateur performance, but is nonetheless admired by Chinese connoisseurs, who regard ink-bamboo painting almost as an extension of calligraphy, and who are therefore not disturbed by lack of skill or versimilitude.

- Pl. XIX (56.22): Bamboo in snow. Attributed to T'an Chih-jui
(late 13th-early 14th century)
Ink on paper. Ht. 12-3/8", w. 8-1/8". Yüan dynasty

T'an Chih-jui is one of a small group of Chinese artists known only through documents and works preserved in Japan. The dozen or so paintings attributed to him agree generally in subject and style, and at least one other has, like this one, an inscription by Ning I-shan (1247-1317), probably the artist's friend. The system of representing snow on the bamboo by laying on an ink-wash ground and leaving white areas adjacent to the stalks and leaves was used also by other painters of the period.

Pl. XX-XXI (15.36i, 15.36h): The Yellow Crane Tower; the Palace of Prince T'eng.

By Hsia Yung (mid-14th century)

Ink on silk. 15.36i: Ht. 10-5/16", w. 10-1/2".

15.36h: Ht. 10-7/16", w. 10-11/16". Late Yüan or early Ming dynasty

A seal following the incredibly fine calligraphy on the Yellow Crane Tower picture identifies the painter by the name he used most often, Hsia Ming-yüan. Little is known about him; one book states that he worked in line "as fine as a mosquito's eyelash." He was probably a pupil of Wang Chen-p'eng (active earlier in the century), who was famous for such *tours-de-force* of meticulous architectural delineation. Interesting is the relative looseness in treatment of landscape elements.

Pl. XXII (11.161e): A knick-knack peddler; a mother with three children.

Anonymous
(14th century)

Ink on silk. Ht. 9-9/16", w. 11-9/16".

Yüan dynasty

A marvel of eye-straining draftsmanship in the same tradition as the two previous leaves, this could be the work of Wang Chen-p'eng or a follower. Other versions of the same subject are known, including a much superior one by Li Sung dated 1210. This leaf differs from others in showing the two excited boys whipping a (toy?) snake. A long study could be devoted to the identification of all the objects in the peddler's pack.

Pl. XXIII (03.112): A lady under a gnarled pine tree.

Anonymous (16th century?)

Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 10-15/16", w. 9-1/2".

Ming dynasty

The lady is probably a Taoist immortal, or fairy; the fantastic scenery may be located on P'eng-lai, one of the Isles of the Immortals. In the lower right corner is the seal of a certain Wang Pen-shan, unidentified, but quite likely the painter. His style would suggest that he was a follower of Ch'iu Ying (ca. 1510-1551).

Pl. XXIV (05.264): A traveler seated on rocks by a river. Anonymous (15th or 16th century)

Ink on silk. Ht. 11-3/8", w. 11-5/16".

Ming dynasty

A weary wanderer has laid down his staff and sits gazing at a flight of birds skimming across the river. On the farther bank, in front of a cluster of houses, two old men meet and exchange bows. The theme recalls pictures of the Taoist sage Chuang-tzu fishing on the shore prior to being invited to court by the Emperor; such a classical reference may have been intended here. The style is interesting and original, and several related pictures are known, but none can be positively connected with any particular master.

- Pl. XXV (11.161a): River landscape in mist. Anonymous (14th or 15th century)
Ink and light colors on silk. Ht. 9-11/16", w. 10-1/4". Yüan or early Ming dynasty

Here is a charming and sensitive, if perhaps over-rarefied, evocation of a Southern Sung theme and mood, derived from the school of Ma Yüan and Ma Lin. Lacking a clear understanding of the later phases of this school, we are at a loss to date the painting precisely, and the tiny signature on the left edge cannot be positively identified. In the foreground, under low pines, a fisherman sits in his boat; a covered bridge spans an inlet on the further shore, and the roof of a pavilion is seen through bare willows.

- Pl. XXVI (11.162c): A boat moored on the shore of a stormy lake; a man disembarking. Anonymous (15th or early 16th century)
Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 10-3/16", w. 10-7/8". Ming dynasty

A man sits in his house under leafy trees on the shore of a lake, watching his servants disembarking from a boat. A horse and a luggage cart indicate that he is about to continue his journey. The superb depiction of the waves and other features agree with a well-known work of Chou Ch'en (active ca. 1500-1535), and the painting seems to be close to him in time and school, possibly even his own work.

- Pl. XXVII (09.245u): Buildings on a rocky promontory by a lake. Probably by T'ang Yin (1470-1523)
Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 9-1/8", w. 9-1/16". Ming dynasty

This is an excellent and faithful copy of a fan painting, now in the Palace Museum, Taiwan, signed by the twelfth-century painter Yen Tz'u-p'ing. The composition is virtually identical, but details of drawing in the copy suggest a date in the middle Ming period, although some have placed it earlier. The two seals at the left, which appear to be those of the artist, read *Liu-ju* and *Hua-ch'an*; the former is a name used by T'ang Yin, and this may well be a study copy done by him, perhaps in his early years.

- Pl. XXVIII (11.490): Fishermen in a boat on the river. Anonymous (16th or 17th century)
Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 9-1/8", w. 8-5/16". Ming dynasty

A fisherman sits eating in his boat, moored on the river bank beneath bare trees; a woman is about to serve him a second helping from a large pot. Another man, standing on the prow, with two poles, is perhaps pushing the boat further into the reeds. The scene belongs to a *genre* especially popular in the Ming, and is by some minor artist of that period.

Pl. XXIX (11.161g): A soft-drink peddler and his customers.

By Chiang Yin
(17th century)

Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 9-9/16", w. 9-15/16".

Late Ming period

The subject is not entirely clear; the peddler is offering a cup of some drink to one of the boys, who, urged by his mother, is offering something in return. The two sections of the peddler's bamboo stand are hung from the large crescent of a buffalo's horns. A small seal with the name of the artist, Chiang Yin, is in the lower right.

Pl. XXX (11.492): Two men meeting in a misty grove.

By Ts'ui Tzu-chung (d. 1644)

Ink and light color on paper. Ht. 10-7/8", w. 14-5/8".

Ming dynasty

A seal in the lower right bears the name of the painter. This evocative picture, although the surface is rubbed and the drawing somewhat softened, preserves the poetic charm of his highly individual style. He was one of those patriotic figures who, upon the fall of the Ming dynasty, chose to die (in his case, through starvation) rather than serve under the Manchu invaders.

Pl. XXXI (61.11): A house among wintry trees.

By Kung Hsien (b. ca. 1610, d. 1689)

Ink on paper. Ht. 8-1/16", w. 13-3/8".

Ch'ing dynasty

A minor work of this great individualist, but of a delicacy often lacking in his large pictures. It was probably the last leaf in an album, as such winter scenes usually were. The drawing of rocks and trees is highly formalized but not severe; a scattering of black dots enlivens the surface.

Pl. XXXII (15.36k): Travelers in a mountain gorge.

Probably by Kao Hsiang
(active ca. 1700-1730)

Ink and colors on silk. Ht. 12-3/8", w. 9-11/16".

Ch'ing dynasty

It is difficult to imagine that the spurious signature of the eleventh-century master Fan K'uan, on the right margin, can ever have fooled anyone; the work is clearly of the Ch'ing dynasty, and perhaps by Kao Hsiang, whose seal appears in the lower right. The style does not agree with his published works, but might represent an early, conservative stage in his development. There are echoes of Northern Sung landscape, specifically that of Fan K'uan, in the composition, the foliage on the summit of the bluff, the tiny figures of travelers.

PLATE I

(54.126)

PLATE II

(48.10)

PLATE III

(48.11)

PLATE IV

(11.155a)

PLATE V

(35.10)

PLATE VI

(15.8)

PLATE VII

(44.53)

PLATE VIII

(11.155d)

PLATE IX

(11.155b)

PLATE X

(09.245c)

PLATE XI

(15.36j)

PLATE XII

(09.244j)

PLATE XIII

(11.155g)

PLATE XIV

(11.161c)

PLATE XV

(11.155h)

PLATE XVI

(44.50)

PLATE XVII

(15.7)

PLATE XVIII

(15.36d)

PLATE XIX

(56.22)

PLATE XX

(15.36i)

PLATE XXI

(15.36h)

PLATE XXII

(11.161e)

PLATE XXIII

(03.112)

PLATE XXIV

(05.264)

PLATE XXV

(11.161a)

PLATE XXVI

(11.162c)

PLATE XXVII

(09.245u)

PLATE XXVIII

(11.490)

PLATE XXIX

(11.161g)

PLATE XXX

(11.492)

PLATE XXXI

(61.11)

PLATE XXXII

(15.36k)

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